Assassination Panel Agrees to Pay Cuts

By Ron Sarro
Washington Star Staff Writer

The staff of the House Select Committee on Assassinations has agreed to take a 35 percent pay cut over the next three months so that none of its 73 investigators, attorneys and secretaries will have to be fired while the organization fights for its life.

The staff, headed by tough former Philadelphia prosecutor Richard A. Sprague, figures the pay cuts would allow the committee to continue to operate at a "very reduced level" while the House is being convinced it ought to approve a multimillion dollar budget for the probes.

A "very reduced level" means that investigators and lawyers cannot take any trips in their renewed look into the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and must cut to near-nothing the number of long-distance telephone calls, a Sprague aide said yesterday.

"There are 250 long distance phone calls backed up now, and that's investigative phone calls, not administrative," a spokesman said.

AT THE SAME time, Sprague, who has become a center of controversy over the staff's request for a $6.5 million annual budget and its plans to use electronic investigative techniques, gave his "personal guarantee" to an aide yesterday that he will not resign in frustration, anger or anything else, while the committee fights for funds.

"I don't want to put the House under pressure. I don't want anyone to operate under the gun," Sprague was quoted as telling the aide.

Sprague, whose salary as chief counsel and staff director is $39,600, is taking the 35 percent pay cut along with the other 72 staff members, which include 48 persons paid $16,000 a year or more. No one's salary will be cut to below $10,000.

But there's a hooker. Sprague has promised to give the staffers pay raises, when and if the House approves a budget, so that almost everyone can make up their pay losses by June if members of Congress give him enough money to do it.

The staff decision presupposes two things. First, that the House will agree next week to re-establish the committee during this 95th Congress, and secondly that the committee will have a budget of $84,000 a month for January, February and March.

Both suppositions are subject to debate, however.

A NUMBER OF House members are outraged by what they consider Sprague's outlandish budget request. The House could decide next week to forget all about reassigning the committee, originally set up last September and operating on an interim basis since its authorization ran out Jan. 3.

Secondly, while the committee staff believes it will be entitled to $84,000 a month for the next three months under a resolution to be considered by the House next week, Democratic leaders have circulated a memorandum putting the figure ut around $60,000 a month.

If the leadership figures prevail, there would have to be further pay cuts, or the step Sprague has been trying to avoid during the budget fight, staff reductions.

The committee is scheduled to go before the House Rules Committee on Tuesday in support of a resolution to re-establish the committee over the next three months, at a level of funding equal to what the committee spent in December. The committee says it spent $84,000 last month. Its payroll without the salary cuts totals $115,000, a spokesman said.

Tough questioning is expected in the rules committee about the assassination committee's budgeting plans, how and what investigative techniques Sprague's staff plans to use, and whether it is planning to investigate the FBI and CIA in connection with the assassinations.

THE RESOLUTION is scheduled to be acted upon by the House on Wednesday. Democratic leaders had to yank the resolution from the House floor last week because of the controversy that had built up about Sprague, his proposed budget, and concern about possible use of lie detectors, electronic eavesdropping equipment, and devices which measure voice stress.

"The House won't go for any of the sums they've been talking about. And it won't go for the systems they've suggested, either. . . . They are out," Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. told reporters yesterday.

O'Neill indicated he favors funding the committee at December's level for the next three months to allow the committee time to cut back its budget request to one the House might accept. "I would hope they cut it back much lower than $4 million," O'Neill said.

Rep. Henry B. Gonzalez, D-Tex., expected to be named new chairman of the committee, said yesterday the committee hopes to develop a budget the House will support and that would allow Sprague to "maintain standards of professionalism." Gonzalez added, "You've got to be realistic if you are serious about a professional investigation done with high standards." He offered no prospective dollar figure.